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## IR as a social science: a response

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## IR as a Social Science: A Response

It was a privilege to be present at my colleague Iver Neumann's Inaugural Lecture, and a pleasure to have the opportunity to comment on the written version.<sup>1</sup> The range of scholarship and insight on display here is truly impressive, and to a great many of the positions presented one can only say 'amen'. It was particularly satisfying to see such a strong case being made for the development of a constructive relationship between International Relations and the emerging field of evolutionary psychology, which has been an interest of mine for some years, and Neumann's background in anthropology is also something that is clearly producing valuable synergies. Still, the Editors of *Millennium* did not expect me to produce a fan letter when they invited me to comment on Neumann's lecture, so most of the rest of this response will be critical – constructively so, I hope, but critical nonetheless. And, in the spirit of the occasion, in responding to this Inaugural I will, rather presumptuously, attempt to channel two previous holders of the Montague Burton Chair, my friends Susan Strange and Fred Halliday, both sadly no longer with us, but both still very much a presence in our discipline and both scholars who cannot be accused of a narrowness of vision – like Iver Neumann, they ranged widely, but, I think, in somewhat different directions.

The most basic point I want to make concerns the overall topic of the lecture, how IR is holding up as a social science and IR's relative standing within academia.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that IR spends far too much time on this kind of navel gazing; we are much too concerned with 'all that meta stuff' as Fred Halliday used to call it. As a part-time member of the Political Theory community in Britain, I occasionally attend tribal gatherings such as the Oxford Political Thought Conference held every January, and, whenever the conversation turns to IR theory, the 'regular' political theorists express surprise about the way controversies in IR theory, certainly in Britain, are so frequently controversies

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<sup>1</sup> 'International Relations as a Social Science' LSE 13 February, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p. x

*about* IR theory. Political theorists address meta- issues as well – consider, for example, the controversies over Cambridge School approaches to the history of political thought – but they do so in connection with substantive topics such as the role of rhetoric in Hobbes’s political philosophy, or the connections between modern republicanism and neo-Roman political theory, not as a way of addressing the status of political theory as a discourse compared to others.

In support of his investigation into the discipline, Neumann correctly identifies C.A.W. Manning as someone who was set on professionalising IR as a social discipline, global quasi-sociology<sup>3</sup>; what he doesn’t mention is how limited Manning’s influence was within the LSE, where he held the Montague Burton Chair for around thirty years, or in the wider world of the intellect. The simple truth is that Manning was not taken seriously within the School community, where ‘big beasts’ such as Popper, Oakeshott and Gellner roamed, and not simply because of his support for Apartheid in South Africa. Susan Strange and Fred Halliday, on the other hand, were taken seriously – they were among the big beasts of their day, listened to, not because of their desire to develop IR as a social science, but because they had something important and substantive to say about the world, which, frankly, Manning did not. Strange did actually develop international studies (a term she always preferred to IR) by promoting International Political Economy (in the teeth of resistance from the economists, it must be said), but her aim was not disciplinary development but a desire to grasp the nature of contemporary capitalism – and how we miss the insights of the author of *Casino Capitalism* and *Mad Money* when we survey the literature on the current crisis.<sup>4</sup> Halliday had strong opinions about how International Relations should be studied, but again they were not focused on academia – a term he disliked and, I think, never used – but on developing the student’s knowledge of the world, on the importance of language training and a hands-on

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid p.x

<sup>4</sup> *Casino Capitalism* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, *Mad Money* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998; for a brief overview of Strange’s approach to international studies see Chris Brown ‘Susan Strange: A Critical Appreciation’ *Review of International Studies* 25 (3), 1999, pp. 531 - 535

grasp of foreign cultures.<sup>5</sup> Halliday's status within the LSE community and the world at large rested on his ability to talk with authority on global politics in the Middle East and more generally, rather than on any contribution he made to IR theory.<sup>6</sup>

With his work on diplomacy and the relationship between theory and practice, Iver Neumann has himself a story to tell here, one that his predecessors would have greatly appreciated, although this was not the focus for his lecture.<sup>7</sup> Fred Halliday would have also appreciated Neumann's desire to extend the universe of historical cases considered by IR theory, and here we are all on the same page – it seems to me the development of 'big history' is one of the most interesting intellectual moves in recent years, something that has already had an impact on IR scholarship.<sup>8</sup> But, and here is my second critical point, this time channelling Halliday, enlarging the universe of cases is rather different from engaging with a 'full' universe of cases. Many possible cases aren't actually that interesting because they result in dead ends; true to his Marxist roots, Halliday was wont to try to identify 'world-historical' events and actors and he was unafraid to give voice to the corollary of this search, which is that some events and some actors are *not* world historical, and therefore of limited significance. World history is made by world powers and world-historical forces. Eurocentrism has become a generalised terms of abuse nowadays, and rightly so if it leads to ignoring the thinking of non-Europeans simply because they *are* non-Europeans, but in my book, and I think Halliday's, it is not Eurocentric to point out that the contemporary international order is a direct descendant of the European system-system that developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and not of, for example, the Imperial Chinese tribute system or the politics of the Steppe.

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<sup>5</sup> See *Rethinking International Relations* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* London: I.B. Tauris, 2003 and, more popular, *100 Myths about the Middle East* London: Saqi Books, 2009. Just as we miss Strange on the current financial crisis, so we miss Halliday's thoughts on the Arab Spring and its aftermath.

<sup>7</sup> See for example and most recently, *Diplomatic Sites: A Critical Enquiry* London: C.M. Hurst & Co., 2013.

<sup>8</sup> David Christian *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2011; Barry Buzan and Richard Little *International Systems in World History* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000

In its day the Steppe was indeed of significance, but as Ian Morris points out in his outstanding survey *Why the West Rules – For Now*, it was the closure of both ends of the Steppe by sedentary polities that made use of the latest weaponry in the sixteenth and seventeenth century that made the emergence of the modern European states-system possible, and consigned the Steppe to the history books;<sup>9</sup> I suspect much the same thing will happen in Darfur and Mali. Moving on to another example cited by Neumann, it is indeed worth studying the thinking behind classical Chinese notions of hegemony because they may influence future Chinese policy and China is most definitely a world-historical actor. We are fortunate at LSE in having colleagues such as Professors William Callahan and Christopher Hughes who can interpret this literature for us – but it is not Eurocentric to point out that, for the time being at least, American neo-realism seems a better guide to Chinese policy than theories about ‘all under heaven’ and the like.<sup>10</sup>

During the course of his lecture, Iver Neumann invited us to engage with Anthropologists, Cultural Critics, Historians, Social Theorists, Psychologists and Biologists and so we should – collectively as a discipline that is, obviously we can’t all engage as individuals with all of these discourses. But, my final point, again channelling Strange and Halliday, but especially Strange, to this list of discourses, and at the top, must be added the study of Political Economy. Susan Strange was given to describing herself in conversation as a Marxist Realist, and Fred Halliday’s *Marxist Roots* have already been alluded to; neither was remotely orthodox but both, I think, understood that the international relations of the modern world have been decisively shaped by contemporary capitalism. For Strange the workings of money and credit were central for an understanding of modern international relations. Halliday’s commentaries on world affairs were

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<sup>9</sup> Ian Morris *Why the West Rules - For Now* London: Profile Books, 2010, p.455 ff.

<sup>10</sup> William Callahan *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Christopher R Hughes ‘Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism: The Geopolitik Turn’ *Journal of Contemporary China*, 20 (71) 2011 pp. 601-620; John Mearsheimer ‘The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia’ *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* Vol.3, 2010, pp. 381 – 396; Yan Xeutong *Ancient Chinese Thought: Modern Chinese Power* Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

rooted in a belief that socio-economic forces were more important than identity and religion in the modern world – it was on this belief that his consistent support for universal values rested. At times, both overstated their respective cases, but I believe both were right to think that if IR is to be a social science it must be one with close links not to the modern discipline of Economics, but to the older discourse of Political Economy.

Although in the nature of the exercise this has been a critical essay, it is wholly appropriate to end on a positive note. It may be that Neumann's account of IR as a social science aligns him more with Manning than with Strange or Halliday, but the breadth of his scholarship is in striking contrast to Manning's dilettantism. He speaks and writes with the authority of a very big beast indeed, someone whose impact on the LSE and the discourse of IR promises to equal that of Strange and Halliday. It was a good to be part of the welcoming party for him last February, and I look forward to disagreeing with him again in the future!